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ABSTRACT

When a class of lethargic college students showed no enthusiasm for their reading assignments in English class, one instructor turned to drama. She assigned a collaborative script, and the students' enthusiasm and motivation relegated her to a "pleasant oblivion." She thought that the novelty of the play genre might enliven the class, and she had been reading that it would increase students' involvement to assign group projects and to make assignments creative and challenging. The characters were to be the actual authors whose stories and books the students were reading. The students were using conventions of drama to analyze and interpret the readings. Drama writing works toward better understanding of style, or voice, and it requires organization skills. Too often the critical essay is the only writing assignment college students receive, but drama works surprisingly well as an alternative writing project. Another thing is that the drama forces students to write with one eye on an audience. The writer will understand the need to give the character a line to speak or an action to perform that will produce a certain result. Words then become important, as the need exists to communicate a message. A sample play, "A Night at the Eight Buttons Tavern," serves to illustrate how the assignment worked in the instructor's class. In a different class, the instructor asked for a 1-page script (not a collaboration) in which students responded to Mark Twain on the themes of "Huckleberry Finn." (NKA)

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Multiple Books, Multiple Authors

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Picture yourself teaching an English class of lethargic college students whose enthusiasm for the reading assignments is, to be charitable, underwhelming. It was this discouraging situation that led me to try drama.

Instead of another critical-analysis paper, I assign a collaborative script. And what happens? Two students are at the computer terminal, taking turns reading and keyboarding; two other student pore over the assigned textbooks, actually reading for pleasure; another clutch of students calls out sentences to be added to the text rapidly emerging on the computer monitor. And so it goes. The students' enthusiasm and motivation relegates me, the instructor, to a pleasant oblivion. Can this be the same class? Are these the same students?

I had given these students the assignment to collaborate on a play for variety. Although there is a long and healthy tradition of theater in language education, I had not bothered with theory, at least, not when I designed the assignment. I had simply thought that the novelty of the play genre might enliven the class for me as well as for the students. Also, I had been reading that it would increase students' involvement to assign group projects and to make assignments creative and challenging; these important points are made by many but I learned them from reading Bean's book, *Effective Sentences*, and another useful resource, the book *Effective Grading*, by Barbara Walvoord and Virginia Johnson Anderson.

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The characters were to be the actual authors whose stories and books we had been reading. Our class had had "shame in literature" as its lens or theme, with readings that had included "Sonny's Blues," by James Baldwin, "Melanctha" from Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives*, selections from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Freud's *Dora* case, Hawthorne's story "The Minister's Black Veil," *Quicksand*, by Nella Larsen, poetry of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, Sharon Hamilton (the biography *My Name's Not Susie*), and even *Pilgrim's Progress*, by John Bunyan. The play would have these men and women come together by chance, as if they had sauntered into a neighborhood tavern one by one and struck up a conversation, using dialogue that was to be woven, whenever possible, from the words of these writers themselves and in the spirit of their writing.

Each student chose a specific writer as a role. For instance, a self-styled politically conservative student, David, adopted John Bunyan and began to mine *Pilgrim's Progress* for characteristic lines that would be appropriate as dialogueWhat would each of these writers say to the others? What were the words that would characterize each one? It was this challenge that had animated the students.

Skeptics among you may be wondering if serious results occurred or whether students just plain enjoyed the liberation from familiar restrictions. In a moment, I will show lines from this play, and from another skit built on *Huckleberry Finn*, to comment on the stylistic features and writing quality. But for now it is sufficient to say that students were using conventions of drama to analyze and interpret the readings.

The playscript assignment was a writing experiment. I had included it in my syllabus as the last project of the term, instead of another traditional critical essay, to move deliberately into an assignment in an alternative format and genre. It's worthwhile

to interrupt the pattern of critical essay assignments. Too often, the critical essay is the only writing assignment college students receive; in fact, students receive too many such paper assignments, so their output is predictably uninspired. Matters of time and energy also figure into the equation, for many students, given the demands of a part-time job or a full-time job plus family commitments, have little time for in-depth reflection in paper after paper.

Drama works surprisingly well as an alternative writing project. I would have been persuaded of that fact purely on the evidence of the students' lively involvement that I witnessed. But what factors create this effect? I wondered if there was a theoretical basis for the play's success. A quick database search reveals that language teachers often rely on drama to produce strong writing.

At a very basic level, there is an equity issue involved. I don't mean actors' equity, of course; rather, it sends a message that everyone has potential to be an artist, that the performing and creative arts are not just an innate "gift," bestowed mysteriously on an elite. We cannot say this often enough! Few young students experience creative drama, according to the *Encyclopedia of Educational Research*, perhaps because not enough research exists to, in a sense, defend the position that drama belongs in school—that it improves language development (Stewig 343).

In addition to the creative issue of equity, drama writing works toward better understanding of style, or *voice*, and it requires organization skills. Let me explore each of these notions.

Dramatic writing teaches voice. A line of dialogue in a script helps a student hear the effect of the words. According to the sociolinguistics scholar Deborah Tannen, one

noticeable difference between narrative or exposition and drama is that the latter is much more "vivid," because it consists of first-person speech (90). After all, each line of dialogue in a play represents the words of a speaker—it's speech. Each speaker's style expresses a unique person. And as Tannen also points out, plays move in the sphere of the particular (92). A line of dialogue occurs, one can say, at the level of one individual's experience with another person. It is possible, then, for the playwright to envision actions between characters and to incorporate these movements or glances into the script. The human detail occurs over and over in plays, so that the form in a sense is ready made for encouraging writers to use specifics.

Another thing is that the drama forces students to write with one eye on an audience. The writer will understand the need to give the character a line to speak or an action to perform that will produce a certain result. Words then become important, as the need exists to communicate a message. In classroom collaboration, students become each other's appreciative audience. A peer workshop produces a similar result when sutdents read plays aloud to each other. (Smith and Herring)

The other result of drama writing that I want to stress today is the way that writing a script can make evident a need for organization. Student writers visualize the action and interaction between characters as the script grows, so they can grasp the importance of design and planning for the script to have a desired effect(see Smith and Herring 39). For example, they can see the need to delay a line of speech from one position to another, or the need for a new character to make an entrance at a point different from the one originally planned.

Of course, students pick up playwriting at various rates, depending on such factors as experience, so that some take longer than others to become engaged. Accordingly, as I want to stress, analysis and interpretation of texts were the outcomes I sought and would assess; that is, I did not assign a performance-quality script but instead a participatory project.

By now, your curiosity must be strong enough to look at samples of this student script. On these overheads, I reproduce the students' typing. The play, *A Night At the Eight Buttons Tavern*, begins with this exchange:

PLATH: Give me a cold one—no, give me two. I've killed one man, I've killed two.

FREUD: Don't you mean a 'hot' one, Sylvia. (Plath gives Freud a dirty look.)

PLATH: I have done it again. One year in every ten. I manage it.

This exchange is notable first because the authors choose to characterize Sylvia Plath, the poet, with distinctive animosity toward men, and second for the wordplay that permits Freud to reveal his analysis of the sexual reference in conversation.

The scene continues with these lines:

BALDWIN: I tell you, Plath, it's terrible sometimes. That's what's the trouble. Walk these streets black and funky and cold. And thee is not really a living ass to talk to, and there is nothing. Shaking, and there is no way I'm getting it out—the storm inside.

BARTENDER: Here's your drink, Sylvia. Sounds like you and Jimmy are trying to drown your sorrows.

WHITMAN: Well I don't need to drown my sorrows with ale. The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me, the first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into a new tongue.

In those lines, the authors manipulated entrances for James Baldwin at a timely moment, following upon Plath's previous lines. Then, the writers created a transition that gave Whitman a chance to deliver a pronouncement. The choice of "ale" in Whitman's speech suggests the writers were trying to create a sense of the historical period. They also show, perhaps, their impression that Whitman's work addresses everyone in general, but no one in particular.

A few lines later, the authors create a speech for Gertrude Stein:

BALDWIN: Life is a ceaseless challenge. I agree with you there Sharon. I believe that deep inside of our own beings we are all still children. We constantly wait for someone to get up and turn on the light, instead of doing it ourselves. That's what life is about. Getting up and finding our own identity and trying to make a name for ourself. I'm just trying to figure out how I'm going to turn opn my own light in my life, that's all. And I'm not sucking my love out of a bottle Sig. Is that all you ever think about?

STEIN: If we say, do not share, he will not bestow they can reiterate, I am going to do so, we have organised an irregular commonplace and we have made excess return to rambling.

BARTENDER: Gert, I'm gonna have to cut you off. I think you've had enough!

This passage illustrates the interest one student took in reading more work by Gertrude Stein, to the extent that she, that , the student, did research online to better understand Stein's voice and her writing. However, the Bartender's comment reflects other students' lack of sympathy.with these obscure comments.

The writers ended the script with the characters departing, two by two, in newfound friendship . . . or more. This sample shows John Bunyan, of Pilgrim's Progress, leaving in the company of Whitman:

WHITMAN: "ever the vexers hoot! hoot! tiull we find where the sly one hides and bring him forth." John, what do you say we view the city by night? "What do you seek so pensive and silent? What do you need camerado"?

BUNYAN: Come hither, you that walk along the way; see how the pilgrims fare that go astray! They catched are in an entangling net, cause they good counsel lightly did forget. Tis true, they rescued were, but yet you see. They're scourged to boot. Let this your caution be.

Whitman and Bunyan depart.

In a different class, I asked for a one-page script, not a collaboration, this time, in which students responded to Mark Twain on the themes of Huckleberry Finn. I asked for one or two characters, from the book itself or including Twain, and suggested a third character, which could be the student him- or herself. I hoped for a "talkback" outcome, as sometimes happens after a play performance, when the audience interacts with cast and playwright. Here is how one student, who happens to be African American, interpreted the assignment:

[Excerpt from Shantelle's script]

I'd like to use plays more widely in the future and to develop assignments that incorporate a script genre into such classes as composition. I've been urging some students, already, to try writing the public-service announcement or an "infomercial" as an alternative approach to a definition paper. All students could use the script writing as a

form of prewriting or rehearsal before launching into an expository or critical paper.[1] With hindsight, I want to take advantage of the energy that a collaboratively written play generates.

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[1] Drama as prewriting is explored well by Blaine H. Moore and Helen Caldwell in "Drama and Drawing for Narrative Writing in Primary Grades."

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